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President Droupadi Murmu confers the award on ten-year-old Shravan Singh, who delivered water and milk to soldiers during Op Sindoor

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PRESIDENT CONFERS PM RASHTRIYA BAL PURASKAR ON 20 CHILDREN

Cricketing sensation Vaibhav Suiryavanshi (pic), singer Esther Lalduhawmi Hanamate, and judoka Yogita Mandavi among 20 awarded on Friday

CHAMPIONS ACROSS SIX FIELDS AWARDED

The award is in recognition of exceptional achievements in the fields of bravery, social service, environment, sports, art & culture and science & technology. President Murmu said it is owing to talented children such as Vaka Lakshmi Pragnika that India is considered a chess powerhouse. Ajay Raj and Mohammed Sidan P, who saved lives of others, were feted too

OF X FACTOR, AND THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

- Cricketer Vaibhav Suryavanshi was feted for making "a name for himself in a highly competitive sport", the President said
- Nine-year-old Coimbatore resident Vyoma Priya, awarded posthumously, had lost her life while trying to save a six-year-old during an electrical accident in their gated community park | **P11**

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AWARDEES AMONG THE 20 ARE SPORTSPERSONS

CHENNAI ▪ MADURAI ▪ VIJAYAWADA ▪ BENGALURU ▪ KOCHI ▪ HYDERABAD ▪ VISAKHAPATNAM ▪ COIMBATORE ▪ KOZHIKODE ▪ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM ▪ BELAGAVI ▪ BHUBANESWAR ▪ SHIVAMOGGA ▪ MANGALURU ▪ TIRUPATI ▪ TIRUCHY ▪ TIRUNELVELI ▪ SAMBALPUR ▪ HUBBALLI ▪ DHARMAPURI ▪ KOTTAYAM ▪ KANNUR ▪ VILLUPURAM ▪ KOLLAM ▪ TADEPALLIGUDEM ▪ NAGAPATTINAM ▪ THRISSUR ▪ KALABURAGI

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25

VISA HASSLE

India presses US to resolve H-1B delay

JAYANTH JACOB @ New Delhi

INDIA on Friday said it has taken up with the US the issue of delays, cancellations and difficulties in scheduling H-1B visa appointments amid mounting concerns that recent regulatory changes have affected thousands of Indians.

"India has received several representations from Indian nationals who are facing delays or problems with the rescheduling of their visa appointments," said Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). "While we understand that visa-related issues pertain to the sovereign domain of any country, we have flagged these concerns of our nationals to the US side, both in Delhi and in Washington."

The latest disruptions follow a series of policy changes, including a steep fee of $100,000 for first-time H-1B visa applicants and a move away from the random lottery system towards prioritising applicants with higher skills.

From December 15, the US also expanded social media vetting to all H-1B and H-4 visa applicants, a step that has led to widespread appointment cancellations and rescheduling months later.

Jaiswal said India is actively engaging with US to address the issues faced by Indians.

Reports say thousands of Indians have been affected with several people who travelled to India specifically to renew their visas being stranded.

A hotel owner in West Bengal's Siliguri pastes a notice banning Bangladeshis | PTI

MEA: Relentless attack on B'desh Hindus worrying

JAYANTH JACOB @ New Delhi

INDIA on Friday expressed concern about the "unremitting hostilities" against Hindus in Bangladesh and condemned attempts to dismiss the continuing violence against religious minorities as media exaggeration or political violence.

New Delhi also reacted cautiously to the return of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rahman to Dhaka after 17 years of exile, stressing that the development should be viewed in the context of ensuring inclusive polls.

"The unremitting hostilities against the minorities in Bangladesh including Hindus, Christians and Buddhists are a matter of grave concern. We condemn the recent killing of a Hindu youth in Bangladesh and expect that the perpetrators of the crime will be brought to justice," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

The comments came after a string of incidents targeting minorities in Bangladesh amid a rapidly evolving political landscape following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina.

Two Hindu men were lynched in a span of one week. Jaiswal said India is closely monitoring the developments across the border and underlined that protection of minorities is integral to democratic credibility.

Referring to the lynching of Dipu Chandra Das on December 18, Jaiswal said New Delhi has unequivocally condemned the incident and sought swift accountability. On the killing of Amrit Mondal, on December 24, Jaiswal appeared to link it to hostilities towards minorities. When asked about BNP's acting chairman Rahman's return, Jaiswal struck a measured note, saying it should be seen in the context of ensuring inclusive elections. He reiterated India's stand that the upcoming elections must be free, fair, and inclusive but refrained from commenting on Bangladesh's internal political rivalries.

Only Aadhaar-verified users can book rly tickets on 1st day of advance reservation

B ANBUSELVAN @ Chennai

NEARLY six months after making Aadhaar verification mandatory for booking tatkal e-tickets, the Indian Railways has also made that mandate a prerequisite for booking general reservation tickets on the first day of the advance reservation period through the IRCTC portal. The new rule, which comes into effect on January 12, has been introduced to ensure that advanced bookings are done only by genuine passengers.

However, passengers booking paper tickets at reservation counters can continue to do so as usual by submitting the reservation form along with any valid identity document.

According to an order issued by the Railway Board, passengers who have not completed Aadhaar verification on the IRCTC portal will not be allowed to book tickets on the opening day of reservations, which begins 60 days before the departure of a train. The booking window opens at 8 am.

From December 29, only Aadhaar-validated users will be permitted to book tickets between 8 am and noon. This restriction will be extended from 8 am to 4 pm, starting January 5. From January 12, bookings from 8 am to midnight will be available only to Aadhaar-validated users. The Railway Board said the expansion of Aadhaar verification for general class reservations aims to ensure that tickets are purchased only by genuine passengers.

Sources justified the move, noting that tickets on high-demand routes continue to sell out within minutes of the booking window opening at 8 am.

PIL IN DELHI HC TO CUT GST FOR AIR PURIFIERS

STAY OFF LEGISLATIVE TURF: GOVT ON GST NUDGE

UDAYAN KISHORE
@ New Delhi

THE Centre on Friday opposed a PIL seeking reduced air purifier rates, telling the Delhi High Court that judicial intervention would violate the principle of 'separation of powers.' "This will open up a Pandora's box," the Centre told a vacation bench of justices Vikas Mahajan and Vinod Kumar after the court questioned why the rates couldn't be brought "within reach of the common man".

Additional Solicitor General N Venkataraman, for the Centre, said there was already a legislative process involving parliamentary standing committee reports and GST Council deliberations.

"How can this process be scuttled through a court process?" he asked.

Key demands of the PIL

The petitioner submitted that on medical devices, GST was five per cent whereas it was 18 per cent for air purifiers. He sought a direction to authorities to charge five per cent on air purifiers as well considering the capital's pollution crisis

On the court's earlier suggestion for a virtual GST Council meeting given Delhi's air pollution crisis, the Centre said it was "not possible" as regulations require physical presence of all members. "This is not a PIL at all. GST is only a ruse...We are scared from the constitutional perspective. It is doctrine of separation of powers," the ASG said, adding the Centre couldn't commit to a Council meeting date.

The bench had noted that air purifiers are pricey, ranging from ₹10,000-12,000 ₹60,000. "It is beyond the reach of a common man. Why not bring it down to a reasonable level...What is the difficulty in the GST Council meeting?" it asked.

The ASG said, "It is a loaded petition, we want to know who is behind this...Somebody wants a monopoly in air purifiers...Health ministry is not even a party." The court permitted the Centre to file a counter-affidavit within 10 days.

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CEO among three held for gang-rape in moving car

RAJESH ASNANI @ Jaipur

THREE persons, including the CEO of a private IT company, have been arrested in connection with the alleged gang-rape of the firm's female manager in a moving car after a birthday party in Udaipur. Police said a local court on Thursday sent the accused to four-day police custody. They identified the accused as GKM IT Pvt Ltd's owner and CEO, Jitesh Sisodia, a senior female executive of the firm and her husband Gaurav Sirohi.

The horrific incident allegedly took place on December 20, while the complaint was lodged on December 23. As per the FIR, the alleged assault followed a birthday and New Year's party organised by the CEO at a hotel in Udaipur. The victim said she reached the hotel around 9 pm. The CEO, the senior female executive and her husband were also present. The party reportedly continued till 1.30 am.

The victim said when she began feeling unwell late at night, the senior female executive offered to drop her home. Around 1.45 am, they left the hotel in the victim's car. The executive's husband and the CEO were present in the vehicle as well.

Midway during the journey, the accused allegedly purchased an intoxicant and forced the victim to consume it, following which she passed out. When she partially regained consciousness, she saw the CEO sexually assaulting her in the moving car, the victim said in her statement.

She alleged that despite her repeated pleas, the accused dropped her home only around 5 am. The victim told the police that her car's dashcam recorded audio and video of the entire incident.

Cylinder blast in front of Mysuru Palace: Death toll rises to 3

KARTHIK KK @ Mysuru

THE death toll in the helium cylinder blast that occurred in front of the iconic Mysuru Palace on Christmas Day has risen to three. Manjula (38), a flower vendor from Nanjangud, and Lakshmi, wife of Rajesh from Bengaluru, who had sustained severe injuries in the blast, succumbed while undergoing treatment at KR Hospital here on Friday.

Earlier, Saleem (40), a seasonal migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh, was killed on the spot in the explosion on Thursday night. The police said Saleem hailed from a village in Kannauj district of UP. He had come to Mysuru a few months ago to sell ice-creams and balloons at tourist areas around the palace. He was staying at a lodge in the city along with three fellow workers.

According to the police, Saleem was involved in filling balloons using a cylinder when the explosion occurred near the palace premises, causing panic among people.

Two others injured in the blast, Kotresh Beerappa Gutter, a KSRTC employee, and Ranjitha are currently undergoing treatment, but are stable and under close medical supervision.

Lakshmi's husband Rajesh told TNIE that his wife, their two children and his sister Ranjitha had come from Bengaluru for Christmas vacation and were staying at their relative's house in Mysuru. After visiting Gopalaswamy Hill temple, the family had arrived at the Palace to see the flower show. The 10-year-old girl child of Lakshmi and Rajesh told TNIE, "My mother was ahead of me and we were just passing by when the blast occurred. My mother was shouting after falling on the ground, while I was taken in an autorickshaw as I got injured in the head." She was waiting outside the ICU of KR Hospital without knowing that her mother had died.

CONTINUED ON P7

Police on Friday barricade the spot outside the Mysuru Palace where a helium cylinder exploded on Thursday evening, killing three people | UDAYASHANKAR S

EXPRESS READ

JDS to go solo in local body elections: Gowda

BENGALURU: Former prime minister and Janata Dal (Secular) supremo HD Deve Gowda on Friday asserted his party's intention to contest the upcoming elections independently, particularly local body polls | **P4**

C'durga mishap: Bus driver dies, toll now 7

CHITRADURGA: The driver of the ill-fated private sleeper coach bus that collided with a truck on NH 48 in Chitradurga district on Thursday succumbed at KIMS Hospital in Hubballi on Friday, taking the toll to 7 | **P7**

2 held for attacking US tourist

AT GOKARNA

SUBHASH CHANDRA NS
@ Gokarna (Uttara Kannada)

THE Gokarna police have arrested two persons for assaulting a foreign national over a trivial issue. An American who was visiting the town and was staying at a rented accommodation was attacked and injured by the two, who were staying next to him at the same place.

The American tourist, Charles Martin Whyte (44), a resident of Manchester, stated in his police complaint that he was disturbed by his neighbours on the night of December 20. "I was woken up by a loud noise and music on December 20 in the wee hours around 3 am. I too put on my choice of music and slept off. I got a knock on the door after sometime. It was my neighbours – Pandu and Nitish. They asked ne to stop the music as it was disturbing their sleep. When I asked them to turn off the music they have put on in return. There ensued an argument and in the process one person hit me with a hard block," he said. **P7**

French man rescued 2 days after he falls in Hampi

KIRAN BALANNANAVAR @ Hampi

A 52-year-old tourist from France was rescued after he was stranded for nearly two days following his fall near the historic Octagonal Bath at Hampi. He was admitted to the Koppal District Hospital on Friday.

The incident occurred around 6 pm on December 24 when the tourist, Bruno Roger, was trying to climb a hillock close to the monument at the Unesco World Heritage Site. While climbing up the rocky terrain, he slipped and fell, sustaining a serious injury to his leg. As the area is largely isolated and receives little footfall during evening hours, he remained unnoticed for two days.

Despite severe pain and limited mobility, Roger managed to survive at the spot and managed to crawl into a banana plantation. Farmers, who noticed him, informed the police. Immediately, the local police and Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) officials rushed to the spot and got him shifted to the hospital. His condition is stable now, and he is able to communicate.

Roger arrived in India alone from France and was staying at a homestay in Kaddirampura village near Hampi. Preliminary inquiries suggest that he ventured out alone to explore the area when the mishap occurred.

The police advised tourists to exercise caution while exploring rocky and isolated areas around Hampi, especially during late hours. They reiterated that visitors should adhere to safety guidelines to avoid such incidents in heritage zones.

The injured French tourist, Bruno Roger